

# Cthulhu

**Cthulhu** is a fictional cosmic entity created by horror author H. P. Lovecraft in 1926. The first appearance of the entity was in the short story "The Call of Cthulhu" published in *Weird Tales* in 1928.

Cthulhu is the high priest to the Great Old Ones and one of the central figures of the Lovecraft Mythos. It is often cited for the extreme descriptions given of its hideous appearance, its gargantuan size, and the abject terror that it evokes.

After its first appearance in "The Call of Cthulhu", Cthulhu makes a few minor appearances in other Lovecraft stories.<sup>[1]</sup> August Derleth, a correspondent of Lovecraft's, used the creature's name to identify the system of lore employed by Lovecraft and his literary successors, the Cthulhu Mythos.

## Spelling and pronunciation

Cthulhu has also been spelled as *Tulu*, *Clulu*, *Clooloo*, *Cthulu*, *Cthullu*, *C'thulhu*, *Cighulu*, *Cathulu*, *C'thlu*, *Kathulu*, *Kutulu*, *Kthulhu*, *Q'thulu*, *K'tulu*, *Kthulhut*, *Kulhu*, *Kutunluu*, *Ktulu*, *Cuitiliú*, *Thu Thu*,<sup>[2]</sup> and in many other ways. It is often preceded by the epithet *Great*, *Dead*, or *Dread*.

Lovecraft transcribed the pronunciation of *Cthulhu* as "Khlûl'-hloo" (IPA: [ˈχɫɯl.ɫu:] ?).<sup>[3]</sup> S. T. Joshi points out, however, that Lovecraft gave several differing pronunciations on different occasions.<sup>[4]</sup> According to Lovecraft, this is merely the closest that the human vocal apparatus can come to reproducing the syllables of an alien language.<sup>[5]</sup> Long after Lovecraft's death, the pronunciation *kə-THOO-loo* (IPA: [kəˈθuːluː]) became common, and the game *Call of Cthulhu* endorsed it.

## Physicality and origins

While the origin of Cthulhu is not definitively established, it is suggested that it is the planet Vhoorl, with his advent somehow connected with stellar phenomena: "I learned whence Cthulhu first came, and why half the great temporary stars of history had flared forth."<sup>[6]</sup> It is also suggested in both *At the Mountains of Madness* and "The Whisperer in Darkness" that Cthulhu is made up of some unknown and foreign matter.

The most detailed descriptions of Cthulhu appear in the short story "The Call of Cthulhu", and are based on the statues of the creature. One, constructed by an artist after a series of baleful dreams, is said to have "yielded simultaneous pictures of an octopus, a dragon, and a human caricature.... A pulpy, tentacled head surmounted a grotesque scaly body with rudimentary wings."<sup>[7]</sup> Another, recovered by police from a raid on a murderous cult, "represented a monster of vaguely anthropoid outline, but with an octopus-like head whose face was a mass of feelers, a scaly, rubbery-looking body, prodigious claws on hind and fore feet, and long, narrow wings behind."<sup>[8]</sup>

When the creature finally appears, the story says that the "thing cannot be described", but it is called "the green, sticky spawn of the stars", with "flabby claws" and an "awful squid-head with writhing feelers". The phrase "a mountain walked or stumbled" gives a sense of the creature's scale.<sup>[9]</sup>



An interpretation of Cthulhu in the sunken city of R'lyeh

## Cult of Cthulhu

Cthulhu is depicted as having a worldwide doomsday cult centered in Arabia, with followers in regions as far-flung as Greenland and Louisiana.<sup>[10]</sup> There are leaders of the cult "in the mountains of China" who are said to be immortal. Cthulhu is described by some of these cultists as the "great priest" of "the Great Old Ones who lived ages before there were any men, and who came to the young world out of the sky."<sup>[11]</sup>

The cult is noted for chanting the phrase "*Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhtagn*", which translates as "In his house at R'lyeh, dead Cthulhu waits dreaming."<sup>[12]</sup> This is often shortened to "Cthulhu fhtagn", which might possibly mean "Cthulhu waits", "Cthulhu dreams",<sup>[13]</sup> or "Cthulhu waits dreaming."<sup>[14]</sup>

One cultist, known as Old Castro, provides the most elaborate information given in Lovecraft's fiction about Cthulhu. The Great Old Ones, according to Castro, had come from the stars to rule the world in ages past.

They were not composed altogether of flesh and blood. They had shape...but that shape was not made of matter. When the stars were right, They could plunge from world to world through the sky; but when the stars were wrong, They could not live. But although They no longer lived, They would never really die. They all lay in stone houses in Their great city of R'lyeh, preserved by the spells of mighty Cthulhu for a glorious resurrection when the stars and the earth might once more be ready for Them.<sup>[15]</sup>

Castro points to a "much-discussed couplet" from Abdul Alhazred's *Necronomicon*:

That is not dead which can eternal lie.  
And with strange aeons even death may die.<sup>[16]</sup>

Castro explains the role of the Cthulhu Cult, stating that when the stars and the earth "might once more be ready" for the Great Old Ones, "some force from outside must serve to liberate their bodies. The spells that preserved Them intact likewise prevented them from making an initial move."<sup>[15]</sup> At the proper time,

the secret priests would take great Cthulhu from his tomb to revive His subjects and resume his rule of earth....Then mankind would have become as the Great Old Ones; free and wild and beyond good and evil, with laws and morals thrown aside and all men shouting and killing and revelling in joy. Then the liberated Old Ones would teach them new ways to shout and kill and revel and enjoy themselves, and all the earth would flame with a holocaust of ecstasy and freedom.<sup>[17]</sup>

The character goes on to report that the Great Old Ones are telepathic and "knew all that was occurring in the universe". They were able to communicate with the first humans by "moulding their dreams", thus establishing the Cthulhu Cult, but after R'lyeh had sunk beneath the waves, "the deep waters, full of the one primal mystery through which not even thought can pass, had cut off the spectral intercourse."<sup>[18]</sup>

Additionally, *The Shadow Over Innsmouth* establishes that Cthulhu is also worshipped by the nonhuman creatures known as Deep Ones.<sup>[19]</sup> "The Whisperer in Darkness" establishes that Cthulhu is one of many deities worshiped by the Mi-Go.

## Star-spawn of Cthulhu

Though not extensively described in Lovecraft's works, the star-spawn of Cthulhu (or Cthulhi, in some adaptations, Cthuuloids) are depicted as sharing physical characteristics similar to those of Cthulhu himself, although their overall size is far smaller. The narrator of *At the Mountains of Madness* notes that the Cthulhu spawn "seem to have been composed of matter more widely different from that which we know than was the substance of the Antarctic Old Ones. They were able to undergo transformations and reintegrations impossible for their adversaries, and seem therefore to have originally come from even remoter gulfs of cosmic space".

While the particulars of their relationship with Cthulhu are unknown, it is clear that they arrived on Earth with him, where they constructed the city of R'lyeh. Although it is said that they continue to dwell in the sunken city of R'lyeh, some of Lovecraft's stories include rumors that a few of them escaped this city's fate, and can be found in hidden

places on Earth.

In *At the Mountains of Madness* and *A Shadow Out of Time* the spawn of Cthulhu wage a great war against both the Elder Things and Great Race of Yith respectively after arriving on Earth. However, they apparently prove unsuccessful in both conflicts.

## Elsewhere in Lovecraft's fiction

Cthulhu is mentioned elsewhere in Lovecraft's fiction, sometimes described in ways that appear to contradict information given in "The Call of Cthulhu". For example, rather than including Cthulhu among the Great Old Ones, a quotation from the *Necronomicon* in "The Dunwich Horror" says of the Old Ones, "Great Cthulhu is Their cousin, yet can he spy Them only dimly".<sup>[20]</sup> Different Lovecraft stories and characters use the term "Old Ones" in widely different ways.

For example, in his 1931 novella *At the Mountains of Madness*, the "Old Ones" refers to a species of extraterrestrials also known as the Elder Things. In this piece, a group of human explorers discover a lost city of the Elder Things deep in the Antarctic mountains. Within this ancient city, a series of hieroglyphic murals depict a great conflict between the Elder Things and the star-spawn of Cthulhu:

With the upheaval of new land in the South Pacific tremendous events began.... Another race—a land race of beings shaped like octopi and probably corresponding to the fabulous pre-human spawn of Cthulhu—soon began filtering down from cosmic infinity and precipitated a monstrous war which for a time drove the Old Ones wholly back to the sea.... Later peace was made, and the new lands were given to the Cthulhu spawn whilst the Old Ones held the sea and the older lands.... [T]he antarctic remained the centre of the Old Ones' civilization, and all the discoverable cities built there by the Cthulhu spawn were blotted out. Then suddenly the lands of the Pacific sank again, taking with them the frightful stone city of R'lyeh and all the cosmic octopi, so that the Old Ones were once again supreme on the planet...<sup>[21]</sup>

As the narrator of *At the Mountains of Madness* notes, "the Old Ones might have invented a cosmic framework to account for their occasional defeats."<sup>[22]</sup> This "cosmic framework" serves as an important element of other stories written by Lovecraft. In "The Whisperer in Darkness", for example, one character refers to "the fearful myths antedating the coming of man to the earth--the Yog-Sothoth and Cthulhu cycles--which are hinted at in the *Necronomicon*".

According to correspondence between Lovecraft and fellow author James F. Morton, Cthulhu's parent is the deity Nug, itself the offspring of Yog-Sothoth and Shub-Niggurath. Lovecraft includes a fanciful family tree in which he himself descends from Cthulhu via Shaurash-ho, Yogash the Ghoul, K'baa the Serpent, and Ghoth the Burrower.

## August Derleth and the Cthulhu mythos

August Derleth, a literary protégé and founder of the publishing house that first printed Lovecraft's works, wrote several stories in the Cthulhu Mythos (a term he coined) that dealt with Cthulhu, both before and after Lovecraft's death. In "The Return of Hastur", written in 1937, Derleth proposes two groups of opposed cosmic entities,

the Old or Ancient Ones, the Elder Gods, of *cosmic good*, and those of *cosmic evil*, bearing many names, and themselves of different groups, as if associated with the elements and yet transcending them: for there are the Water Beings, hidden in the depths; those of Air that are the primal lurkers beyond time; those of Earth, horrible animate survivors of distant eons<sup>[23]</sup>

According to Derleth's scheme, "Great Cthulhu is one of the Water Beings". Derleth indicated that "the Water Beings oppose those of Air"—a departure from traditional elemental theory, in which water and fire were opposed—and depicted Cthulhu as engaged in an age-old arch-rivalry with a designated Air elemental, Hastur the Unspeakable, whom he describes as Cthulhu's "half-brother".<sup>[24]</sup>

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Based on this framework, Derleth wrote a series of stories, collected as *The Trail of Cthulhu*, about the struggle of Dr. Laban Shrewsbury and his associates against Cthulhu and his minions, culminating, in "The Black Island" (1952), with the atomic bombing of R'lyeh, which Derleth has moved to the vicinity of Ponape. Derleth describes Cthulhu in that story as

a thing which was little more than a protoplasmic mass, from the body of which a thousand tentacles of every length and thickness flailed forth, from the head of which, constantly altering shape from an amorphous bulge to a simulacrum of a man's head, a single malevolent eye appeared.<sup>[25]</sup>

Derleth's interpretations are criticized by some enthusiasts of Lovecraft's work, including Michel Houellebecq in *H P Lovecraft: Against the World, Against Life*, for injecting a stereotypical conflict between equal forces of objective good and evil into Lovecraft's strictly amoral continuity.<sup>[26]</sup>

## In popular culture

### Music

A number of musical pieces have been inspired by Cthulhu and the works in which it appears. Perhaps the most famous such works are Metallica's "The Call of Ktulu", an instrumental that draws on "The Call of Cthulhu", "The Thing That Should Not Be", a song also heavily influenced by the Cthulhu mythos and quotes by H. P. Lovecraft himself, and "All Nightmare Long", which is based off of the Hounds of Tindalos's hunt of a group of individuals following the rise of R'lyeh.

The Swedish band Therion recorded a song entitled "Cthulhu" on their 1992 Death metal album *Beyond Sancturum*.

The Acacia Strain's "Cthulhu", from the album *Continent*, appears to involve its singer calling a relationship partner Cthulhu, while alluding to themes of death and judgment. The British black metal band, Cradle of Filth, released "Cthulhu Dawn" in their "Midian" album in 2000.

The Deathcore band The Black Dahlia Murder also wrote a song based on the Cthulhu Rising, titled "Throne Of Lunacy" in their album *Deflorate* (2009).

Two songs of British goth rock band Fields of the Nephilim reference Cthulhu directly : "Last Exit For The Lost" of the album "Nephilim" and the intro to their album "Elizium", called "Dead But Dreaming".

The Canadian progressive house producer Deadmau5 recorded a song entitled "Cthulhu Sleeps" for his 2010 album *4x4=12*. Also, regarding an incident where he collapsed on stage in July 2010, Deadmau5 said this: "I had an epiphany... Cthulhu called. Nobody was home, completely played my mind... couldn't take it. Passed out."

### Games

The Chaosium game *Call of Cthulhu* features Cthulhu prominently, as might be expected. Fantasy Flight Games' *Arkham Horror*, a board game based on Lovecraft's stories, includes Cthulhu as among the "great old ones" whom the investigators must face, as does their living card game *Call of Cthulhu*. The malign deity also appears in Pagan Publishing's miniature skirmish game *The Hills Rise Wild*, where the players control rival bands of cultists hell-bent on summoning different mythos entities.

The *Dungeons & Dragons* sourcebook *Deities & Demigods* originally included statistics for Cthulhu in its first printing. These were removed in the later first edition printings, as well as subsequent editions.<sup>[27]</sup> The online game *Lost Souls* includes Cthulhu as a semi-divine being that can be invoked by Erisian Liberation Front guerrilla theologians, and has a quest called "The Call of Cthulhu" which has the objective of destroying Cthulhu.<sup>[28]</sup> <sup>[29]</sup>

The supplement *Munchkin Cthulhu* for the humorous satirical card game *Munchkin* from Steve Jackson Games makes repeated references to Cthulhu and other Cthulhu Mythos material, and features an expansion named "Call of Cowthulu" where a parody of Cthulhu — Cowthulu — appears as well as further expansions "Munchkin Cthulhu 3 – The Unspeakable Vault" and "Munchkin Cthulhu 4 – Crazy Caverns". Great Cthulhu is the strongest monster in

the game "Star Munchkin" as well.<sup>[30]</sup>

Cthulhu can be summoned in the Nintendo DS game *Scribblenauts*, and also in its sequel *Super Scribblenauts*, as a humorous element.<sup>[31]</sup>

## Print

Aside from literature that is thematically part of the Cthulhu Mythos, Cthulhu makes cameo appearances or is parodied in other works regularly. In the sixth Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy book, *And Another Thing...* by Eoin Colfer, Cthulhu briefly appears, being interviewed by Hillman Hunter for the vacant position of god in his post-Earth human colony. It also shows up in *Why We're Here* by Fred Van Lente and Steve Ellis, which draws on the Cthulhu Mythos to parody apocalyptic Christian mythology, being written in the style and format of a fundamentalist Chick tract.<sup>[32]</sup> Another mention of both, Cthulhu and his cult occurs in the Neil Gaiman short story *Shoggoth's Old Peculiar* where an American tourist meets two rather "squamous" characters at a British seaside pub in a town called Innsmouth.

## Visual arts

Cthulhu has served as direct inspiration for many modern artists and sculptors. Prominent artists that produced renderings of this creature include Paul Carrick, Stephen Hickman, Kevin Evans, Dave Carson, Francois Launet, John Kovalic, Stephen Fleishacker, and Ursula Vernon. Multiple sculptural depictions of Cthulhu exist, one of the most noteworthy being Stephen Hickman's Cthulhu statue which was featured in the *Spectrum* annual,<sup>[33]</sup> and is exhibited in the John Hay Library of Brown University of Providence. For some time, replicas of Hickman's statue were produced by Bowen Designs.

## Television

Cthulhu appears in Season 14 of the animated series, *South Park*. The episodes "Coon 2: Hindsight", "Mysterion Rises", and "Coon vs. Coon and Friends" lampoon the 2010 Deepwater Horizon disaster, with BP accidentally unleashing Cthulhu upon the world with their incompetent clean-up efforts.

Cthulhu appears in Season 5 of an animated television series, *The Grim Adventures of Billy & Mandy*. The episode, "Prank Call of Cthulhu", portrays Cthulhu as an ancient demon whose mere appearance causes insanity. If awakened, Cthulhu will cause the destruction of the world, but the episode also describes him as loving golf and prank calls.

*The Real Ghostbusters* episode "The Collect Call of Cathulhu" features the Ghostbuster team fighting Cthulhu and his spawn. The episode contains a great deal of authentic mythos material, including the Necronomicon, Miskatonic University, and a character representing Clark Ashton Smith and August Derleth.

## Notes

- [1] "Cthulhu Elsewhere in Lovecraft," *Crypt of Cthulhu* #9.
- [2] Harms, "Cthulhu," "PanChulhu," *The Encyclopedia Cthulhiana*, p. 64.
- [3] Lovecraft said that "the first syllable [of *Khlûl'-hloo* is] pronounced gutturally and very thickly. The *u* is about like that in *full*; and the first syllable is not unlike *klul* in sound, hence the *h* represents the guttural thickness." H. P. Lovecraft, *Selected Letters* V, pp. 10 – 11.
- [4] S. T. Joshi, note 9 to "The Call of Cthulhu", *The Call of Cthulhu and Other Weird Stories*
- [5] "Cthul-Who?: How Do You Pronounce 'Cthulhu'?", *Crypt of Cthulhu* #9
- [6] "Lovecraft, "The Whisperer in Darkness"" (<http://www.mythostomes.com/content/view/27/70/>). Mythostomes.com. 2007-04-09. . Retrieved 2009-06-15.
- [7] H. P. Lovecraft, "The Call of Cthulhu", (<http://www.mythostomes.com/content/view/30/92/>) *The Dunwich Horror and Others*, p. 127.
- [8] Lovecraft, "The Call of Cthulhu", p. 134.
- [9] Lovecraft, "The Call of Cthulhu", pp. 152-153.
- [10] Lovecraft, "The Call of Cthulhu", pp. 133-141, 146.
- [11] Lovecraft, "The Call of Cthulhu", p. 139.

- [12] Lovecraft, "The Call of Cthulhu," p. 136.
- [13] Will Murray, "Prehuman Language in Lovecraft", in *Black Forbidden Things*, Robert M. Price, ed., p. 42.
- [14] Marsh, Philip *"R'lyehian as a Toy Language — on psycholinguistics"*
- [15] Lovecraft, "The Call of Cthulhu", p. 140.
- [16] Lovecraft, "The Call of Cthulhu", p. 141. The couplet appeared earlier in Lovecraft's story "The Nameless City", in *Dagon and Other Macabre Tales*, p. 99.
- [17] Lovecraft, "The Call of Cthulhu," p. 141.
- [18] Lovecraft, "The Call of Cthulhu", pp. 140-141.
- [19] Lovecraft, *The Shadow Over Innsmouth* (<http://www.mythostomes.com/content/view/61/70/>), pp. 337, 367.
- [20] Lovecraft, "The Dunwich Horror", (<http://www.mythostomes.com/content/view/63/70/>) *The Dunwich Horror and Others*, p. 170.
- [21] Lovecraft, *At the Mountains of Madness* (<http://www.mythostomes.com/content/view/29/70/>), in *At the Mountains of Madness*, p. 66.
- [22] Lovecraft, *At the Mountains of Madness*, p. 68.
- [23] August Derleth, "The Return of Hastur", *The Hastur Cycle*, Robert M. Price, ed., p. 256.
- [24] Derleth, "The Return of Hastur", pp. 256, 266.
- [25] August Derleth, "The Black Island", *The Cthulhu Cycle*, Robert M. Price, ed., p. 83.
- [26] Bloch, Robert, "Heritage of Horror", *The Best of H. P. Lovecraft: Bloodcurdling Tales of Horror and the Macabre*
- [27] "Deities & Demigods, Legends & Lore" (<http://www.acaeum.com/ddindexes/setpages/deities.html>). *The Acaeum*. . Retrieved 2010-05-10.
- [28] "Cthulhu (ELF Invocation)" ([http://lostsouls.org/wiki/Cthulhu\\_\(ELF\\_Invocation\)](http://lostsouls.org/wiki/Cthulhu_(ELF_Invocation))). *Lost Souls Wiki*. . Retrieved 2010-05-10.
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- [31] "Summon a cuddlesome cowlike Cthulhu in "Super Scribblenauts"" (<http://bloodygoodhorror.com/bgh/blogs/10/08/2010/summon-a-cuddlesome-cowlike-cthulhu-in-super-scribblenauts>). *Bloody Good Horror*. 2010-10-08. . Retrieved 2010-10-31.
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- [33] Burnett, Cathy *"Spectrum No. 3: The Best in Contemporary Fantastic Art"*

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  - "Idh-yaa", p. 148. Ibid.
  - "Star-spawn of Cthulhu", pp. 283 – 4. Ibid.
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- "Other Lovecraftian Products" (<http://www.hplovecraft.com/popcult/other.asp>), *The H.P. Lovecraft Archive*

## External links

- "The Call of Cthulhu," (<http://www.mythostomes.com/content/view/30/92/>) H. P. Lovecraft's original story featuring the first appearance of Cthulhu
  - Cthulhu Lives, the Lovecraft Historical Society (<http://www.cthulhulives.org/toc.html>)
  - Satellite map showing both locations of R'lyeh (<http://www.bloosee.com/explore/#lt=-48.356249&ln=-127.177734&z=7&m=2&c=11111111111&o=0>) on the Legends and Sea Stories layer of BlooSee
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